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POP ROCKS: CHANGES BRING BIG RETURN FOR TWO AUGUSTA VENUES

When I returned to Augusta some 15 years ago, the James Brown Arena, then known as the Augusta-Richmond County Civic Center, was in a shambles.

That is not hyperbole.

It had recently invested in some expensive ice-making equipment, wasn't coming close to making a profit and had a board that, while populated with smart and capable people, had deplorable chemistry. And this was not an anomaly, a blip in the history of an otherwise successful venture. It had been that way for a while and, sadly, would stay that way for a while more.

Which makes the news released quietly last week even more surprising and spectacular.

Augusta Entertainment Complex, which also includes Bell Auditorium, announced that the previous fiscal year had been the most successful in the aging venues' history.

According to the release, the facilities' net increased by 57 percent or about \$260 thousand. That means it made money – something, if I am being honest, I was fairly convinced would never happen.

So what changed? What went right when so much had previously gone wrong?

The answer is simple. Experts arrived. In 2008, the Augusta-Richmond County Coliseum Authority – perhaps with some urging from the city, taxpayers and anyone who had ever gone to an event at one of the two venues – agreed to bring in a professional management company. The big 'winner' was Global Spectrum, now known as Spectra by Comcast.

Now I am, by my nature, something of a cynic. Not a pessimist – but definitely a cynic. So when Spectra came in with the intent of turning things around, I wondered what tricks the company had up its sleeve. The hole just seemed so deep.

As it turned out, it had a lot of tricks, tricks it continues to unveil. It sold sponsorships, strategically booked high-profile acts which bolstered the reputation of the venue. Improvements were made to infrastructure. Everything improved.

The truth of the matter is that the Bell and James Brown will probably never be the biggest earners in the Spectra stable – not even close. The capacity is too small and the buildings too old. But that's not the point. The point is that despite a checkered history and rather insurmountable odds, things have turned around. And in an industry where profits can never be guaranteed and aging venues far more iconic than the James Brown – the Nassau Coliseum on Long Island comes to mind – are closing, even the smallest of successes is a major accomplishment.